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## ABSTRACT

This report describes developments in Britain and the United States which enable people to use, in an education or training context, components of their achievements drawn directly from their prior experience. The report is divided into three sections. The first section consists of an account of the present situation in Britain concerning further education of adult learners; the second section offers an account of some American developments in this area; and the final section offers comments on possible applicability of these developments in Britain. The credit awarding process in the United States for prior learning from life experience, usually involving the development of a portfolio, is described. Models of portfolio preparation are highlighted from the Thomas Edison State College of New Jersey, New York's Empire State College and the State University of New York, Brockport; and the University of Maryland. The idea of accrediting prior learning through examination, the possible use of college-level examinations in Britain, and the use of course evaluation and articulation are discussed, as is the development of institutional consortia to provide links between community groups and educational institutions. Contains nine references. (GLR)

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Developments in Britain  
and Lessons from the USA

Coombe Lodge  
Report

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COOMBE LODGE REPORT  
Volume 21 Number 5

# **ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS: DEVELOPMENTS IN BRITAIN AND LESSONS FROM THE USA**

By Richard Gorringe



# Coombe Lodge Reports

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# **ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS: DEVELOPMENTS IN BRITAIN AND LESSONS FROM THE USA**

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Director

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## FOREWORD

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The Staff College is pleased to present this report by Richard Gorrington on developments in the accreditation of prior learning achievements. Richard is well placed to offer advice on what is becoming an increasingly important aspect of education and training for adults as he made a study visit in 1983 to the United States of America to observe and report on initiatives there, and, for the last two years, he has been working on the accreditation of prior learning at the National Council for Vocational Qualifications in London.

The objectives of his visit to America were to

- observe and report on experiential learning programmes, particularly those involving community networks and/or directed at disadvantaged groups
- observe and gain greater understanding of 'credit transfer' and the use of competency-based education in that context.

His findings are reported here together with his views on developments in Britain where credit transfer, experiential learning, competence and performance are now key factors in the expansion of opportunities on post-compulsory education and training.

Workshops and seminars on experiential learning (promoted by FESC as well as other agencies) are now becoming commonplace. In addition, developments in the accreditation of such learning have been boosted by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). In its recent publication, 'Assessment in National Vocational Qualifications — the use of evidence from prior achievement', NCVQ says:

'Evidence of past achievements, if properly authenticated, may be equally or more valid than evidence from a test or examination . . . Prior achievements are simply those which have occurred in the past . . . If a candidate has practised the required competencies, in work or outside, and can produce evidence of his or her competence from past performance, this could provide an alternative source of evidence that could be taken into account for the award of a qualification'.

I commend this report to you as a valuable addition to our thinking on the accreditation of prior learning in this country.

Geoffrey Melling  
Director  
Further Education Staff College

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## INTRODUCTION

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This report describes developments in Britain in enabling people to use, in an education or training context, evidence of their achievements drawn directly from their prior experience. Such evidence is generally used within an assessment process, which in some cases will lead to a general statement of achievement, and in others to credit in relation to a qualification. For this reason the processes involved have often been referred to as the 'assessment of prior learning'. Recent work, however, has shown that it is not the process of learning itself which can be assessed or credited, but what has been achieved by it. Assessment and credit for prior achievement is what is usually involved. In recognition of the fact that assessment of prior learning, or APL, still has some currency, a useful compendium term is 'accreditation of prior learning achievements' or 'APLA.' This is further explained and used throughout this report.

Developments in Britain owe much to earlier work in the USA which itself is part of a general interest in 'experiential' learning. In the particular context of the needs of adult learners, experiential learning gained outside a college was often treated as valuable 'prior learning' which could lead to college credit. There is an immediate parallel with recent British work to offer credit for prior achievements within the structure of qualifications, both at degree and post-degree levels, and through the range of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). The Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) is taking forward this initiative in higher education with its assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) programme, which is part of the credit accumulation and transfer scheme (CATS). The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), with assistance from the Training Agency (TA), is promoting the establishment of assessment arrangements which encourage candidates to offer evidence from their prior achievements in relation to NVQs.

Because similar work is going on in two education and training systems which are different in many respects, a cross-cultural comparison is likely to be informative. Part I of this book consists of an account of the present situation in Britain; Part II offers an account of some American developments, and Part III offers comments on possible applicability in Britain.

Further information about APLA may be obtained from CNAA, NCVQ or the Training Agency. The Further Education Staff College would be glad to receive reports of related work in progress, issues encountered and solutions adopted.

July 1989

Richard Gorringe

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## **PART I: DEVELOPMENTS IN BRITAIN**

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### **CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**

The origins of finding ways both to assess and to accredit individuals' 'prior learning' lie in attempts in the further and higher education (FHE) sector to relate to the needs of adult learners. Recognising, valuing and building upon what learners bring with them has long been a principle of good practice in meeting adults' needs. As adults have progressively become more important in FHE, the idea of formally assessing and where possible, offering credit for what they have already achieved, has grown in significance.

A number of developments in the basic idea have taken place during the 1980s. Many of these drew on comparable work in the USA which began a decade earlier, and was supported by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). This was originally linked with promoting access to higher education, partly because the early '80s was a time of expansion in 'Access Studies' courses and various alternative entry procedures. More recently it has become important in enabling people with demonstrable achievement, whether in work or not, to gain credit towards vocational qualifications. The developing National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) framework opens up these possibilities, and NCVQ has published an Information Note on how this might be done. Recently, too, the process has been linked with adult training and retraining, particularly through Employment Training (ET) which requires initial assessment of participants. It is also becoming clear that people of all ages and backgrounds may have prior learning achievements which could be recognised and credited.

These shifts in purpose have led to changes of definition and focus of the process itself, and account for some of the differences in terminology which

appear in documentation. Most fundamental is a shift from a college or institutional perspective towards a client (or learner) perspective. Originally, the process was of interest to colleges which wished to value what students brought with them in one of two ways: *either* as a demonstration that entry requirements for a particular course had been met despite lack of traditional certification, or as a way of offering exemptions from attendance on parts of a course. In this context, the term 'prior learning' was used to mean: 'the things a student has learned *prior* to entering a college course'. The emphasis was on *assessment* as a process by which what has been learned can be set out and evaluated by an admissions or course tutor. It was not usually seen as necessary to offer formal credit, hence *accreditation* took place only in the sense of the college offering informal recognition of that which had been learned.

More recently, the process has been placed in a wider context than simply access to a college course — important though this is. The development of flexible adult training arrangements such as ET, and the availability of NVQs in unit form (or SCOTVEC modules in Scotland), have opened up the possibility of offering credit for prior achievement **before** any further learning is planned. A potential learner might thus approach a college or other training institution with accredited NVQ units, and seek further learning opportunities — rather different from seeking exemptions from entry requirements or parts of courses. The emphasis therefore falls on assessment for accreditation in a formal sense, such as through NVQ unit credits. The preferred term for that which is being accredited is 'achievement' rather than learning, because it is only achievements, rather than the learning process, which can be recognised through formal certification.

For prior learning achievements to be formally accredited, they must be assessed according to the requirements of the awarding body which will award the resulting units. The major international awarding bodies have regulations covering assessment of prior learning generally (BTEC, 1988 and CGLI, 1988), but it is sometimes unclear whether they apply to entry to validated courses, exemptions from study requirements, or full award of credit. Some colleges have used these regulations, for example in relation to BTEC Continuing Education units. To take the process forward into the framework of NVQs, the NCVQ and the Training Agency have mounted a development project in collaboration with BTEC, C & G, RSA, and HCTB. This relates to the issue of what may count as acceptable evidence of prior achievement, and also how colleges and others might establish

assessment facilities. For more information, see NCVQ/TA Accreditation of prior learning programme: Summary Report (Simosko, 1989).

## HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENTS

In the last decade much work has been done on assessment and accreditation in relation to prior learning achievements. The first phase of work, directed mostly towards enabling 'non-traditional' adult students to demonstrate their suitability for entry to higher education, owed much to the first exploratory study by Norman Evans (FEU, 1983).

This was followed by a study of practice which was published as **Assessing experiential learning** (FEU, 1987), together with some very interesting case studies. In the meantime, institutions of higher education, colleges of FE and some LEAs established various ways in which people could have their prior learning achievements assessed and, where appropriate, credited. The County of Avon LEA developed this work in relation to adult foundation courses, access to HE, YTS and other programmes. This led to the **Handbook for the assessment of experiential learning** (LET/County of Avon, 1987).

The work in HE was especially supported by the CNAA which commissioned a study of the use of 'prior experiential learning' in HE (CNAA, 1988). The possibility of candidates receiving credit towards parts of degree programmes, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, is a basic part of the CNAA Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS), and work continues to develop this.

The key development now is enabling candidates to be credited with units drawn from NVQs (and other vocational qualifications until the NVQ framework is complete), irrespective of whether they wish to undertake a college course. Colleges and other organisations who provide assessment for credit purposes clearly have a role to play in this. In particular, doing so is a way in which colleges can increase their enrolments of adults because many who gain some NVQ units by this means will wish to continue their learning to obtain a full NVQ and beyond.

## DEFINITIONS

The term '*prior learning*' was originally borrowed from American work on recognising adults' achievements in the context of course-based degrees. It

was useful because it meant learning which has taken place prior to college attendance. But for people seeking credit before enrolling on any particular course, it is not a very suitable term. It is possible to use it for all '*learning*' which has taken place at any time in the past, i.e. before assessment leading to credit. But this is not very helpful because, logically, all learning is '*prior*', in this sense — even if it took place the day before!

There is a further difficulty with the notion of crediting learning because what is really credited, at least within vocational qualifications, is the achievement to which learning has led. If I am to be credited with the achievement of being able to use a keyboard (to certain standards) then it is this achievement itself which I must demonstrate — it would be no good simply demonstrating that I had undertaken a learning process because from it, no one could know if I had achieved what is to be credited or not.

The term '*prior learning*' has achieved some currency but NCVQ and others are introducing more precise terms, so it is important to agree terminology. In Britain the clearer term '*prior learning achievements*' has currency and is used to mean:

- achievements from learning experiences not specifically undertaken to enable someone to gain a particular qualification, or contributory credits — e.g. '*experiential*' learning of all kinds, and formal but uncertificated courses and programmes;

and

- achievements from learning experiences which were designed to enable someone to gain a qualification different from that which they are now seeking, e.g. from a course leading to a GCE '*A*' level which was left part-way, or from a hotel and catering course when the desired qualification is in management.

The acronym '*APLA*' is now used for accreditation of prior learning achievements. In practice this covers achievements both from formal study and from all kinds of experiential learning undertaken outside a college or other educational and training institution. A typical list of possible learning contexts would include:

- employment and experience in the work place generally;

- independent and self-directed study, such as TV, radio, correspondence courses, in-company training, distance learning, adult education classes;
- life experiences other than employment, e.g. travel, parenting, pursuit of interests and hobbies.

Prior learning achievements, then, are all those things which a person knows, understands, and can do, at the point where they decide they wish to obtain arecognition, e.g. become formally qualified in something through certification.

This definition explains why NCVQ uses the term '*use of evidence from prior achievements*' in relation to assessment and, subsequent credit, towards NVQs. The point is that whatever has been achieved may be a source of evidence which can be used within an assessment process in order to satisfy the requirements set out in the units of an NVQ. Evidence from prior learning achievements may be matched to the elements of competence and performance criteria which comprise an NVQ unit, just as is evidence from contemporary sources such as assignments and tests. Assessment and crediting is going on just as with people whose achievements are the results of a contemporary educational or training programme. The difference is in the nature, i.e. source, of the evidence of achievement used.

The application of evidence of achievement to a given 'statement of competence', i.e. NVQ, is a specialist definition of *assessment* which NCVQ has adopted. This is the definition which is gaining currency as the NVQ framework is established, although it is important to be clear that earlier definitions, used in relation to assessing 'prior learning', referred simply to gathering and collecting evidence of learning achievements generally. Student portfolios, for example, would contain all sorts of evidence as a result of a general assessment of the person's learning. This is perfectly valid as it stands, but not if credit towards NVQs is the goal.

NCVQ similarly reserves use of the word '*accreditation*' to describe its own activities in recognising awarding bodies' qualifications as NVQs. Candidates are said to be 'credited' with NVQ units in order to recognise their achievements. This giving of credit is commonly referred to elsewhere as 'accreditation', but the problem with this word is that it has a range of meanings. Accreditation is used to mean the formal award of credit through a vocational qualification, but it is also used generally to mean the

giving of status or recognition to a learning programme or course. In the latter sense CNAAC accredits degree courses, or certain Open College networks 'accredit' courses or even periods of experience. For this reason, NCVQ terminology refers to *'assessment and certification'*, and to individuals receiving credits towards an award. Nevertheless, the term 'accreditation' is commonly understood to mean award of credit to an individual.

### WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED FROM EXPERIENCE?

The primary importance of combining assessment of prior learning achievement with institutional change, particularly in colleges predominantly offering further education, is a major lesson of the last five years. Without this, APLA either does not take off in the institution at all, or remains confined to one course — or even one subject area, where its effects and benefits are marginal. Other lessons are summarised below.

The possible benefits of APLA and calculations about the time required, whether and how much credit might be sought etc., depend on the purposes for which APLA is undertaken. These are in practice very closely related.

At one end of the spectrum there are many people in the adult population who have learned a great deal from experience, but are largely unaware of it and have great difficulty in expressing what they have achieved. They may lack practice at 'educational' skills such as putting concepts into words, collating data, making analyses and synthesising information. If much of their learning experience falls outside traditional educational descriptive taxonomies of skill, knowledge areas etc., their achievements may be additionally hard to express. Despite this, APLA may be a highly useful process for them. Given sufficient time they will be able to identify and demonstrate achievements, particularly in the general skill areas such as communication, calculation etc. The process itself will be a boost to their confidence, as well as a chance to practice writing and other skills normally required for learning. It is, however, unlikely that they will have achievements in the areas, or of a level, needed to make them creditable within a qualification.

At the other end of the spectrum are people who lack certification for their achievements, but have sophisticated levels of skill and knowledge. This will often be related to a job or to self-employment activity such as running

a business. They will have a high level of awareness of what they know and can do, and will recognise a good deal of their own competence in the specifications for relevant vocational qualifications. People working with computers and in administrative and management capacities are often in this category. Given a specification to work with, they will readily identify their prior learning achievements and take responsibility for producing evidence for them.

Just as what people bring to the process can vary so widely, so does what they might achieve from it. A basic list of purposes for APLA would include:

- for careers and educational guidance;
- to demonstrate that an applicant has already met the entry requirements for a particular course;
- to seek exemption from parts of a course;
- to seek credit towards a particular qualification.

Which of these is relevant to a particular individual's prior learning achievements is a key issue, and one which must be decided as quickly as possible.

## **BENEFITS OF APLA**

It is commonly accepted that it is very useful to give formal recognition to people's learning achievements at the point where they begin the process of learning and obtaining a qualification. The benefits of this include:

- raising motivation by recognising what has already been achieved;
- valuing learning experiences, even though they have taken place informally and outside any educational institution;
- avoiding asking people to relearn what they already know and thereby wasting time and resources;

- aiding the diagnostic and planning process by offering a firm basis from which to progress in achievement;
- speeding up the process of obtaining a qualification and making more time available for further learning.

All these would indicate that anyone who wishes to continue to learn and develop, and/or to become qualified, would benefit. The seeking of credit towards a vocational qualification is being greatly facilitated by the development of NVQs. This is explained below.

### **HOW NVQs FACILITATE ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS**

An NVQ is defined as a '*statement of competence*'. This means that it is expressed in terms of the competence, and the associated standards of performance, required by people wishing to be vocationally qualified in a particular vocational area. It describes competence standards to be reached, not activities to be carried out on a training programme or topics to be studied as in a syllabus. Because of this, it provides an ideal 'template' against which candidates may match their achievement — whether evidence for it comes from a contemporary observation or test, or from past experience. NVQs require a candidate to have achieved certain standards of competence, not to do so by any particular means. Prior achievements are therefore potentially perfectly valid and acceptable forms of evidence.

In addition, the statement of competence which constitutes the NVQ is divided into units of competence which are free-standing and have employment value. Where prior achievements are not sufficient to claim credit for a whole qualification, as will usually be the case, the NVQ unit structure facilitates giving credit for meaningful parts of the whole.

NVQs are also free from any artificial barriers on access to assessment; requirements relating to age, previous experience, or attendance on courses are removed. Each NVQ represents a set of opportunities to identify achievements, assess them to standards, and give credit for them. Although many people receiving credit for their prior achievements will wish to take further learning opportunities, there is no requirement to do so. What is needed is an assessment process leading to credit. This could be provided in a college, other training organisation or in the workplace. The key issue

is the availability of a suitable structure which includes competent assessors. Many existing education and training bodies may wish to become involved in providing an assessment service on a consultancy basis, which could open up assessment and credit to many more people than at present. There are clearly still many issues of institutional development to be addressed.

This raises the question of how colleges will market assessment facilities and recruit candidates. APLA could, for example, form part of an induction process for every course, or it could be offered within a free-standing workshop, or be more closely linked to existing college courses. There are questions over whether candidates will be specifically recruited for assessment or whether they will be recruited to courses, and offered APLA as an additional benefit.

These concerns raise the issue of how assessment as a service will be provided within a college, and by what mechanisms credit will be awarded to successful candidates. This itself leads on to the larger issue of how learning opportunities will be provided other than within a course mode.

### **SOME EMERGING MODELS**

In terms of how assessment might be offered as a service, and evidence from candidates' prior achievements be used, experience suggests that there are two main modes which need to be clearly distinguished. Broadly, clients may be divided into those who need a protracted process to identify and express their prior learning achievements, and those who can do so readily — especially if encouraged by a subject-specialist. A possible model, therefore, would have two forms of provision:

- (i) an assessment workshop or centre offered on a continuous basis with roll-on/roll-off facilities, open to all candidates who need time and help to identify and express their prior achievements,
- (ii) a guidance service, leading to access to specialist/subject tutors who will negotiate assessments, for candidates who have a grasp of their prior learning achievements and only need assistance to 'match' their achievements to the specifications for units within a vocational qualification.

The workshop approach allows individuals the time and access to group-work and other useful activities as needed. A possible basis is the preparation of a 'portfolio' of evidence of achievements. If these prove to cover areas for which credits drawn from vocational qualifications could be claimed, the candidate will need to progress to the second form of provision. Those colleges which are involved in providing 'adult foundation' courses may find an APLA workshop augments these very effectively. Alternatively, the workshop could be run elsewhere in the community: there is some experience to suggest that community groups can reach adults who would be unlikely initially to go to a college. In one model, the college supplied a tutor to run the workshop on a tenants' association premises.

The second form of APLA provision is particularly useful for employed people and others with a clear perception of their achievements, e.g. because they use them in their work. An initial guidance interview will readily establish which units their achievements may relate to, especially if they already know in which area they wish to be qualified. After this, more detailed discussion will be required with a specialist to establish whether the candidate should be assessed in the way the college traditionally assesses a particular unit, e.g. through assignments or tests, or whether gathering evidence of achievement from prior experience is more appropriate.

Direct entry to assessments normally provided in relation to a particular qualification for course participants may be quickest, but may not be appropriate where a candidate has strong documentation of achievement. Negotiating assessments is always a demanding process which requires careful judgement.

Once assessment has taken place, recognised achievements may be credited and the candidate then may need further learning opportunities to complete a qualification. As already noted, this may be difficult to arrange unless access to some form of unit or module-based delivery is available. In some cases, open learning with tutorial support may be appropriate for completion of parts of a qualification.

## CONCLUDING ISSUES

To offer APLA facilities and enable individuals to obtain full benefit from them, a number of issues must be addressed. These may be summarised as:

- (i) an organisational model must be established relating to the ways in which APLA will be provided, and for which client groups;
- (ii) specialist tutors must be trained in negotiating an assessment process and in devising ways in which alternative forms of evidence of achievements might be given;
- (iii) assessment arrangements, geared to APLA candidates' needs, must be established, and some form of on-going support, e.g. on a tutorial basis for those who will not have the support of a college group;
- (iv) a unit or module-based delivery structure must be planned and offered either separately from traditional course provision, or linked to it.

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## PART II: PRIOR AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE USA

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### EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: PRIOR AND SPONSORED

The term '*experiential learning*' is a general one which is used in the United States to cover a variety of innovative approaches used particularly with adult students. There is a movement to ground the term in a body of theory which explicitly relates learning to experience, and is influenced by the work of Dewey and Piaget. However, the term has a more pragmatic meaning, roughly synonymous with 'non-institutional learning', i.e. learning from doing and experiencing — rather than from classroom instruction. In this sense it refers both to the skills and knowledge which people have learned from their life experience before entering college, and to attempts to use the college as a base for organising a structured period of learning from activity outside itself, as a substitute for a period of classroom instruction. The first category is known as '*prior experiential learning*', the second as '*sponsored experiential learning*'.

The context in which the experiential learning movement in American higher education operates is that of institutions' desire to increase both accessibility and provision for adult students. The demographic, economic, and social reasons for this are similar to those in Britain, but the demographic issue impacts even more severely because of the traditional commitment to mass higher education. In curricular terms there is a coincidence of concerns with those of the 1960s for providing a 'liberal' education with relevance to both personal enrichment and civic responsibility. To these, as in Britain, are being added relevance to vocational learning and an emphasis on 'life planning' as an integrating element.

In practical terms, commitment to various forms of experiential learning has produced not only various mechanisms for achieving greater access

which are familiar in Britain (e.g. institutional consortia, distance learning, information and support networks), but a number of other innovations in the way educational credit is actually awarded. The most readily accessible of these is probably the assessment and accreditation of students' prior experiential learning, for which pilot schemes have already started in Britain.

### **AWARDING CREDIT FOR STUDENTS' PRIOR LEARNING**

It is a basic tenet of the experiential learning movement that any college-level learning which can be adequately substantiated should potentially be creditable by an educational institution. This is not to say that credit would always be awarded, since institutions make their own value judgements about what is worthwhile. However, the council for adult and experiential learning (CAEL) has been concerned to demonstrate that students entering institutions bring with them prior learning from many sources which can be demonstrated and authenticated. It remains up to institutions to prescribe the form in which such learning will be acceptable, and to evaluate whether or not it is of college level in any particular case.

#### **Prior learning contexts**

Credit may be given for a student's prior learning acquired from the following:

- informal learning contexts encountered in life experience generally, e.g. working, voluntary activities, hobbies and interests, home-making and parenting;
- formal learning contexts, e.g. courses taken in other institutions, TV and correspondence courses, employment-based training and in-service education.

The term 'experiential learning' is sometimes used to cover all learning which occurs outside of a formal classroom setting, i.e. roughly synonymous with 'independent learning'. It is also used in a narrower sense to mean the strictly informal learning from life experience. The latter is the most difficult kind to identify and relate to formal college learning, for which purpose the portfolio preparation process was devised. It should however be noted that some institutions refer to portfolio preparation as the

over-all process of gathering and presenting all prior learning, including that acquired in formal ways. In this case, the portfolio is a compendium of different forms of assessment of prior learning.

### **Assessing prior learning**

There are a number of different ways of establishing the authenticity and credit-worthiness of a student's prior learning, however it was acquired. These all involve obtaining and presenting an assessment of it, which is then evaluated by the institution to determine the amount of credit (if any) to be given.

This is likely to be an extended process for learning acquired informally from life experience (i.e. experiential learning in the strict sense), which, unlike learning from a formal course, does not have a given framework such as a syllabus or statement of learning outcomes. Consequently, an organising framework must be developed to facilitate the assessment process, for example, a series of headings or course titles.

Following this, assessment may be carried out in a number of ways, depending on the nature of the learning. For example, writing skills could be judged by examining actual pieces of writing. Skills such as interpersonal communication and personnel management, could be assessed by observing them *in situ*. Areas of knowledge could be assessed by reference to whatever evidence is offered of their possession — whether written documents, working papers, or simply testimonials from a credible source.

Learning acquired in a formal context, however, may already have been assessed in some way, for example, the award of grades, statements of competence, or by certification. Such formal learning is therefore often evaluated separately from life experience learning, since it may be done by direct reference to the content, materials used, assessments, etc. in relation to whatever measure of success has been awarded to the student.

Both formal and informally acquired prior learning may also be assessed by one-off examinations. There are a number of standardised tests which can be taken to establish learning gained from either a formal course, or from more nebulous learning experiences. These would be evaluated for credit in their own terms, i.e. by reference to the learning covered and the student's score.

In summary, the three main ways in which assessments of prior learning may be presented for credit evaluation are:

- (i) a portfolio detailing learning acquired informally from life experience;
- (ii) records of formal learning, e.g. courses taken in other institutions, at work, via TV or correspondence;
- (iii) test-scores from college-level tests.

All these forms of evidence may be included in the student's 'portfolio of prior learning', which then takes the compendium form. The student's role is to gather and present evidence in the form of assessments of prior learning; only then can the institution evaluate it to determine its credit-worthiness.

### **Evaluating prior learning**

The institution's role is based on its policy towards the various ways in which credit could potentially be earned for prior learning. This involves decisions about what forms of evidence are acceptable, whether prior learning must be matched to existing college courses, and how much credit may be awarded for experiential learning whether acquired from prior life experience or sponsored under a learning contract with the institution. The range of possibilities varies from institutions such as Empire State College in New York which acts as a kind of 'broker' in giving credit entirely based on prior and sponsored experiential learning, to those which simply allow exemption from certain of their required courses on the basis of a satisfactory evaluation of prior experiential leaving. Of those which act as 'brokers', Thomas A Edison State College in New Jersey has gone a stage further and allows credit to be earned by evaluation, not just of what has been learned prior to entry, but of outside courses taken during the degree programme. In this way what begins as giving credit for prior learning can open out to change the focus of the institution itself from a primary concern with classroom-based teaching, to network-based evaluation of diversely acquired learning.

The way in which assessment and evaluation of non-traditionally acquired learning is handled in an institution depends therefore on the way the institution views itself. In the following I have restricted consideration

primarily to the accreditation of students' learning, although in some institutions the two categories are merging.

### **ACCREDITING PRIOR LEARNING FROM LIFE EXPERIENCE: THE PORTFOLIO**

Awarding credit acquired informally from life experience is a major part of American initiatives to accredit students' prior learning. It usually involves the preparation of a portfolio which, as stated earlier, may also contain details of prior learning acquired from formal contexts.

The portfolio preparation process is always undertaken in order to seek credit from a particular institution. The way in which the learning is presented must therefore mesh with the nature of the curriculum in that institution. A crucial question is whether experiential learning (prior or sponsored) is accepted as a part of the curriculum in its own right, and therefore forms part of the degree scheme, or whether it is only acceptable if it matches, and therefore substitutes for, the outcomes of taught courses in the institution.

Colleges normally produce a guide showing how prior experiential learning should be presented, and whether it will be treated as credit against courses, block credit, or in some other way. Similarly, some colleges require lists of 'competency statements', others will accept general statements of skills and knowledge provided they cover the content of a given course, while the most innovative allow the student to negotiate the nature of the presentation as long as it can be shown to fit within a heading of the over-all degree programme.

The college will similarly give guidance as to the degree of rigour in assessment required to establish that the student does possess learning of 'college-level'. Some will accept assessments in the form of testimonials from responsible people stating that the student has the skills and knowledge she claims. Others require contemporary assessments of competence carried out by approved assessors. Actual demonstration in the portfolio (e.g. of writing skills) or documents produced by the student all add weight and contribute to the final evaluation, from which credit is awarded. Since the college must take responsibility for the evaluation process, and possibly justify its outcome to a regional accrediting agency,

CAEL has produced materials on valid and reliable assessment techniques which evaluators could call upon if in doubt.

## **MODELS OF PORTFOLIO PREPARATION**

### **Thomas A Edison State College (TESC)**

TESC is an institution which provides its students with a degree scheme and invites them to earn credit within the scheme by a range of means including portfolio assessment, and credit courses taken at another institution. Taught courses may therefore be a relatively small part of a student's programme, while credit for prior learning could be a large part. TESC itself offers no taught courses.

Students who seek credit by portfolio are required to make a credit claim, under a particular category of their degree programme, based on presenting assessments of their experiential learning. The learning must therefore fit into the framework of the particular degree they are taking. There are several degree schemes available covering both baccalaureate and associate degrees in arts, sciences, business administration, etc.

The claimed learning may be described in a number of ways, including under course headings from college catalogues — using the terminology typically employed. A narrative describing how the learning was acquired, together with supporting documentation, is also required. The portfolio workshop begins with students writing a personal résumé, proceeds to identify areas of college level learning, and ends with a succinct statement of learning supported by a narrative. TESC faculty then evaluate the learning claim for credit, having regard to breadth, authenticity, etc.

TESC supplies the student with academic counselling, a portfolio workshop and access to accreditation. It neither provides teaching nor sponsors experiential learning itself. In this way, rather than an institution organised around the transmission of knowledge, it has become one organised around evaluation and accreditation. This is a logical development of the experiential learning movement, and one with many exciting features.

### **Empire State College (ESC)**

ESC has no formal taught courses, but it does provide the opportunity for

sponsored experiential learning conducted with a mentor through whom a learning contract is drawn up. Students must follow a degree programme within a certain distribution of study areas. They may then earn credit both for prior learning and by sponsored experiential learning.

A student's prior learning cannot be presented by matching it to taught courses since there are none in the college, and this mode of presentation would not fit the way in which sponsored experiential learning is undertaken. Prior learning must be presented under one of the broad study areas (e.g. the arts, cultural studies, educational studies) in the form of an 'area essay' which is produced in relation to a mentor, just as is sponsored experiential learning. In order to be accepted as college-level it must go beyond competent application to cover general and theoretical understanding. This could be achieved by relating prior learning to an academic discipline.

These demands are made of prior learning because, since the institution's curriculum is composed of students' experiential learning, it must meet all normal characteristics of learning in an institution of higher education. The only difference between prior and sponsored learning is that the first was acquired prior to entry, while the latter involves breaking new ground. This is an interesting example of the way in which aspects of the portfolio preparation process differ according to the way in which the institution concerned conceives of its curriculum. Of crucial importance in this case is the role of the mentor, of whom more use could perhaps be made in British education institutions.

#### **University of Maryland (UM)**

The University of Maryland (UM) represents a different approach again to portfolio preparation, being an institution with a traditional range of taught courses. Up to 30 credits are allowed for experiential learning which, since sponsored experiential learning is not undertaken, is by definition prior learning. The portfolio preparation process is itself a three credit course.

The process follows the common pattern whereby learning is identified from experience, and then substantiated in various ways. The form of presentation involves use of course titles and corresponding descriptive terminology. The criteria for college-level learning are somewhat less 'academic' than those used at Empire State College, turning mainly on the student's ability to apply skills and knowledge gained in one context to

another. For example, claimed competence in the area of personnel management gained in one work situation would have to include a description of principles learned which could be applied elsewhere.

Prior learning is finally evaluated against what is covered by taught courses, and credit awarded accordingly. The portfolio preparation process is therefore based upon descriptions of learning that are recognisable to teachers covering similar ground within the institution; there is less student negotiation over what is to count as learning than in an institution based on experiential learning.

### **State University of New York, Brockport (SUNYB)**

Brockport College is an institution with a traditional range of taught courses, to which has been added the possibility of earning credit for prior learning through portfolio preparation. In this case the identification of learning is assisted by the use of Bloom's taxonomy. Students are encouraged to write descriptions of their learning experiences under categories derived from courses taught in the institution, such as communication skills, the humanities, etc. Using Bloom, they then extract affective, cognitive, and psycho-motor learning they have acquired from these experiences. The programme tutor assists them to gather evidence in the form of assessments, supporting documentation, etc. and through this to ascertain which learning is likely to be evaluated as of college level. The final statement of skills and knowledge is then submitted for evaluation and may be awarded credit in one of three ways:

- (i) credit on the basis of comparability with an existing taught course;
- (ii) general credit, not linked to a particular course, listed under the independent study part of the degree scheme;
- (iii) credit in relation to a combination of existing courses, i.e. parts of different courses in the same general area.

This represents a reasonable commitment to experiential learning within the framework of the institution. It is perhaps one which could be replicated in Britain more easily than the all-embracing procedures of Empire State College.

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## **PART III: USE OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN BRITAIN**

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Although sometimes unrecognised, most of the major national validating bodies allow within their regulations the use of experiential learning to fulfil their requirements. Leaving aside the conscious use of sponsored experiential learning within the institution, there is therefore much scope for the recognition of prior experiential learning in partial fulfilment of qualification requirements.

### **Prior learning achievement for advanced standing**

The major constraint at degree level is simply that degree courses are generally planned and run in much larger units than the American 'course'. Where, however, modular degrees exist (or existing degrees could be treated as modular) there is no reason why advanced standing for certain modules should not be available on the basis of prior learning achievement.

Where the awards of such bodies as BTEC, C&G and RSA (i.e. those becoming NVQs) are concerned, the process is potentially much easier because these bodies utilise some form of module or unit structure. Two issues to be faced are the administrative one of how claimed learning should be presented to be recognisable to the institution, and the educational one of what is to count as sufficient rigour of assessment. The first issue is relatively straightforward where the content of particular awards is specified in terms of the required learning outcomes in the student as, for example, in BTEC modules. Considerable progress has been made on the second issue by tutors working on existing pilot schemes for accrediting prior learning achievement. As already explained, the emerging NVQ structure resolves many difficulties.

### **Prior learning achievements for admission**

For a student to be able conscientiously to claim exemption from part of any course in the post-school sector on the basis of his/her prior learning

achievements is itself a contribution to the provision of access. However, this form of access is likely to benefit a smaller number of those eligible for further and higher education than the traditional strategy of demonstrating the latter's suitability for entry. Eliciting a student's prior learning achievements is a way of assessing such suitability. A portfolio could be evaluated against admission requirements for a particular course, in the same way as for possible award of advanced standing. It should be noted however that this is unlikely to be effective if the achievements are not presented in a way both succinct and recognisable to the institution concerned, as it would always be in the American system. Similarly, there must be confidence that the assessments of learning achievements offered have been rigorous and authentic.

This issue is of great importance for the future of portfolio preparation schemes in Britain. If admissions tutors are presented with student portfolios containing learning claims in a variety of different forms, and covering many disparate skills and knowledge areas, it will be impossible to relate these claims to course entry requirements in clear terms. Certainly, possession of any kind of portfolio would be likely to indicate some educational potential in its possessor. But without due clarity it will be impossible to work towards an entitlement system comparable with, but alternative to, the GCSE or GCE 'A' level system.

This problem, however, may be readily overcome by making reference to American practice. Receiving institutions could be encouraged to specify 'non-standard' entry requirements for their courses, preferably in competence terms. This would involve asking: 'What exactly are the educational competencies required for entry to x course?' Such a statement would then form an organising framework which students could use to present their prior learning achievements, and so establish their suitability for entry. The emphasis of the receiving institution's evaluation of the portfolio would then fall on the adequacy or otherwise of the assessments of achievement carried out.

Work of the above kind is currently going on in both the FE college and polytechnic sector. If the prior learning were not only matched to the institutions stated entry requirements, but had been formally accredited, it would indeed be a powerful contribution to access for the so-called 'unqualified' students. This raises the whole issue of using prior learning achievements to claim credit towards a qualification as explained in Part I.

## **ACCREDITING PRIOR LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS FROM FORMAL COURSES**

Giving credit for a course or programme of formal learning undertaken in a different institution from the one in which the student is currently enrolled is a well established process in the American education system. Many colleges allow students to 'transfer in' college-course credit received elsewhere, and some have entered into articulation agreements with neighbouring institutions to allow automatic transfer of this kind. Some senior colleges in the City University of New York system, for example, accept course credits from community colleges against their own lower-division course requirements. Generally, however, even a credit-bearing course would be subject to evaluation to ensure that the level of learning covered was suitable to allow credit in the receiving institution.

The process of course evaluation, coupled where appropriate with an articulation agreement, is a powerful device for enabling credit to be given for prior learning achievements which are of this kind. It is also one which can be extended to formal learning which is officially 'non-credit', either because it has occurred outside an educational institution, or because it occurred in one which operates non-credit courses (such as an Adult Learning Centre). Just as with accrediting experiential learning presented in a portfolio, formal courses evaluated as creditable have to mesh with the institution's existing curriculum. In some cases transfer credit would have to match courses already offered in the receiving college; in others learning acquired in this way could be designated as a part of the curriculum under a suitable heading of the required degree distribution.

At Bunker Hill Community College, in Boston, Massachusetts, the process of evaluating an institution's courses, followed by a form of articulation agreement, has been used with considerable success to bind a number of providers into a consortium known as The Open College. In effect, any institution which is offering college level learning of some kind can apply to have its courses evaluated by Bunker Hill. If the evaluation is successful, a credit-rating is given to the course(s), and they then feed directly into a student's degree programme. In this way a whole range of providers, including company training, adult education centres, community schemes, voluntary groups and trades unions, can be designated as offering credit-bearing course provision.

The crucial process is the evaluation by a team from Bunker Hill. The

criteria used to determine the level of learning include:

- does the course material compare with that used at Bunker Hill?
- are the class hours adequate?
- are standard textbooks used?
- is the quality (i.e. qualifications and experience) of the teachers suitable?

If the learning is college-level, the provision evaluated is described under course titles which relate to the Bunker Hill curriculum; each such course is then given a credit-rating. No attempt is made to deal with students' actual achievements, which is an undoubted limitation for the British context.

The existence of an Open College network of this kind means that students taking an enormous range of formal education and training are at the same time working towards a college degree. Quite disparate provision, from company vocational training to recreational courses, can become part of the fabric of a college qualification. The relationship between employer-based training and higher education becomes tangible to the benefit of both. Above all, students can accumulate credit over time and while engaged in different kinds of work, leisure and study.

## USE OF COURSE EVALUATION AND ARTICULATION

The key factor in the articulation process is that the receiving institution evaluates the level and type of learning for which credit is sought, against its own criteria. No exact equivalencies of learning outcome are sought, for example, between Bunker Hill courses and courses offered elsewhere. This is generally possible because the college is autonomous in terms of making its own evaluations, and because the American degree structure enables courses to be 'transferred in'.

The term 'articulation' is not used in Britain, but could generally be seen as similar to the process of offering exemption for either course or credit requirements.

Several forms of exemption currently operate in Britain. One is the FE access course which enables students to earn 'credit' against the entry requirements of a course in an HE institution. Successful students are deemed to have learning of an equivalent level, but different type, from GCE 'A' level. The HE institution recognises the course as 'articulating' with its entry requirements, although no exact parallel is made with the learning outcomes of two or three 'A' levels.

Exemption arrangements are also offered by validating bodies where a candidate holds whole or part awards from another body. For example, BTEC specifies that possession of GCE 'O' level mathematics allows credit to be given for its level 1 unit in mathematics. Again, no exact paralleling has been attempted between the two awards, but the 'O' level has been 'evaluated' as involving at least as much (or more) mathematical skill and knowledge as BTEC requires.

Credit transfer of this latter kind is very difficult in Britain because validating bodies specify the nature of their awards in quite different ways. Some, for example, use behavioural outcomes, others prescribe knowledge areas to be covered. Local agreements for transfer are operated, however, on an informal basis when individual candidates request exemption for previous (or past) awards taken. This issue is fortunately being addressed in the development of NVQs.

A similar problem exists with attempts to specify the credit worthiness of education and training which is not formally validated. Examples would include much of the training under the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), employee-training conducted by large companies and courses offered in adult education institutes, as well as certain parts of FE. For these forms of provision in particular, the American model of evaluation and articulation could have far-reaching implications. For example, employer-based YTS training could be 'articulated' with vocational preparation, craft, and technician courses provided by a college. Similarly, certain non-advanced courses run in an FE college could be articulated with parts of 'modular' degree schemes offered in the polytechnic sector, allowing the transferring student an element of advanced standing.

The crucial component of an effective system of articulation is the confidence participating institutions have in it. This requires a careful and rigorous system of evaluation taking into account learning outcomes of courses and assessment procedures, as well as scrutiny of course materials, etc. It is

vital, too, that the recognition of a course as creditable is done by the body that will actually award the credit. A number of 'Open College Networks' have grown up which attempt to facilitate this process by attaching a credit-rating to courses submitted to them. This may provide some local currency for otherwise dissimilar courses and programmes, but there is a danger of inadvertently raising false expectations. Credit awarded to a student for taking a particular course is only worth having if it is negotiable with educational institutions and employers. For reasons of coherence and simplicity, as well as authenticity, colleges and employers prefer to rely on national accreditation arrangements provided by the established awarding bodies. The only real exceptions are those cases, such as specifically designed Access Courses, where a college wishing to make use of a student's credit evaluates its worth directly. Local accreditation is likely to complicate an already diverse picture and, rightly or wrongly, lead to worries about quality and authenticity.

### **ACCREDITING PRIOR LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS BY EXAMINATION**

A third way in which credit may be achieved for learning achievements acquired in some context outside a college is by taking a nationally operated examination acknowledged to establish college-level equivalency. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) have developed the best known of these in the US: CLEP or College Level Examination Program. The areas covered are English, mathematics, and the humanities. A pass in a CLEP subject will be credited by many colleges against course requirements. Similar examination programmes are designed for members of the armed forces DANTES or Defence Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support operates one. Some states have local versions. These examinations gain their credibility from the fact that ETS has vast experience of standardised testing, and some colleges use their tests to assess students' learning on their own courses. A variant of this which some colleges will allow is the 'challenge examination'. A student can 'challenge' a course offered in the college by asserting that he/she has already learned its content. The teacher simply sets an examination, which, if passed, results in credit being awarded.

### **POSSIBLE USE OF COLLEGE-LEVEL EXAMINATIONS IN BRITAIN**

This particular form of alternative credit clearly has an egalitarianism about

it: it enables learners to establish what they know — or not as the case may be. However, it points to the heavily 'content-biased' nature of much American higher education, and to the value traditionally placed on the all-or-nothing end-test. By contrast, the great value of the portfolio assessment process is that it allows for progression development, and for competence, rather than knowledge, to be recorded. At best, CLEP-type examinations offer an alternative assessment procedure for experientially acquired learning, which perhaps serves those who prefer formal testing.

Although one London college is involved with a possible General Education Diploma (GED) for adults which would parallel the American high school equivalency examination, it seems unlikely that further development would be beneficial to non-traditional students.

## **ACCESS AND INTER-INSTITUTIONAL LINKS**

Many of the features of American higher education already mentioned have been used to make access easier for adults in particular, and to increase the post-school participation rate in general. Examples below include institutional consortia, links between educational institutions and community groups, a 'time shortened' degree, and career planning workshops.

### **Compact for Lifelong Educational Opportunities (CLEO)**

At the time of writing, CLEO was a consortium of 38 colleges and universities in the Philadelphia area. It resulted from agreement between colleges to pool their resources in attracting and providing for the adult returner. As such, CLEO offered three main services to the intending student.

Firstly, an accessible central location with a data base system providing immediate information on the courses and programmes offered in each constituent institution. Information is readily available — not just on academic matters, but on times and places, availability of childcare, and names and telephone numbers of contacts in the colleges.

Secondly, career and academic counselling available on both a one-off and extended basis. CLEO counsellors would check applicants' previous transcripts, and use a variety of techniques to enable decisions to be made about further study. Two well known computer self-assessment programs are available — ENCORE and SIGI.

Thirdly, assistance given through workshops with the assessment of students' prior learning achievements. Students were encouraged to prepare a portfolio of prior experiential learning, gather previous transcripts, etc. This is then passed to the college they wish to enter for evaluation of achievements and possible award of credit. The portfolio is not an admission tool: it is a conscious claim for credit at a particular institution, which has been chosen after academic and career counselling. It is however a natural adjunct to such counselling, because assessments of prior learning may well assist students in the process of deciding where to continue their studies.

CLEO was effective for a number of reasons. Most importantly it centralised expensive services which constituent colleges would otherwise have to provide. Because it was supported by all colleges in the consortium, yet was independent, it was trusted to provide impartial information and guidance. Perhaps above all it was successful in attracting significant numbers of potential students.

Probably the most useful service CLEO provided to its members was the organisation of assessment of prior learning achievements, which many of them would not have the expertise or resources to conduct themselves. Through this service, CLEO's information services were related to the providers' activities. This is important because a service which simply provides information may lack credibility with the colleges. And every time CLEO referred a student to an institution with a portfolio for evaluation, the value of the consortium is reinforced.

The model of CLEO would seem ideal for use in an LEA. There are already borough-based advice and guidance centres, and experience is growing of assessing prior learning achievements through portfolio preparation. If a consortium were to be formed in a manageable location, these services could be offered centrally and career counselling (either individual sessions or workshops) added. This model would also have the effect of relating the FE sector, adult education institutes and polytechnics without one appearing to dominate. Through prior learning achievements assessment, student recruitment would be firmly related to provision, thus enabling constituent institutions to experience the benefits directly.

It is worth noting that CAEL itself has joined forces with the American Council on Education (ACE) to establish 'Project LEARN', which aims to set up a nationwide network of services for adult learners. Its three main

aims are to:

- integrate an emphasis on experiential learning with services for adults;
- establish connections between providers, and between them and learners;
- build alliances between education, industry, labour unions, churches and the military.

The underlying philosophy is that education must take its services to the people it aims to serve, wherever they are. Workplaces, the forces and community groups are all contexts in which people spend their lives and where they may be contacted. The significance of all the methods of giving credit for prior learning achievements (portfolios, college-level examinations, transfer credit) is that they recognise and take seriously these contexts while linking them to formal education in colleges.

#### **National Congress of Neighbourhood Women (NCNW) — College Programme**

This college programme is an exciting example of changing not only the mode of delivery of a degree programme, but the actual content. NCNW is a nationwide network of women's neighbourhood groups which exists to promote the self-development of women through involvement in their community. The dominant theme is that equality of opportunity and status in society for women must come through women empowering themselves to act in and on their own concerns — beginning in the community and moving outwards. Part of this empowering involves developing skills of leadership, organisation and change, which NCNW fosters in its regular work.

It was therefore a logical step to consider the role which formal education plays in empowering people to act. However, NCNW was concerned that any formal education offered to its members would build on, and enhance, the skills and knowledge they were already developing in their community work. Formal education would have to be servant of the women's needs, for example in enabling them to obtain paid employment in public and community service jobs, not master. In this respect, the work of Empire State College (ESC) was ideal.

As already explained, Empire State College has no formal curriculum but is concerned with validating experiential learning which is demonstrably of college level. ESC agreed to validate first a two-year, and subsequently a full four-year, degree programme for NCNW members in Brooklyn. The programme is carried out on NCNW premises and consists of a number of elements. The centre is a counselling programme in which the women (and some men) are encouraged to identify and document their prior learning, and form a career plan, on which their degree plan is built. Much of the subsequent learning is experiential, for example through a contracted internship (work placement) in some branch of community service. ESC, through its Centre for Labour Studies, provides courses in basic skills, where required, but the rest of the academic programme is conducted through mentors who assist with drawing up learning contracts.

This mode of learning fits well with the notion of empowering which underpins NCNW work. It is a good example of a formal institution so structured that it can relate to expressed needs in this way. Perhaps most noticeable of all was the enthusiasm (leading to considerable success) the students displayed. Through negotiation, the women's own learning had been both recognised and enhanced by contact with a formal institution. Such a process perhaps provides a model for curriculum change which fits well with certain traditions of adult education in Britain, and demonstrates their interface with further and higher education.

#### **State University of New York, Brockport (SUNYB)**

The theme of changes in both delivery and curriculum to meet the needs of adult returners has been taken up at SUNYB in the form of its 'Alternate College.' The underlying theme is that a degree programme distribution designed to meet the needs of traditional 18 year old students may not suit those of older students. By reorganising the curriculum, and supporting it with small classes, close student/faculty links, etc., not only are more students attracted, but the drop-out rate is roughly half that of the regular degree programme. This is achieved by devising a number of 'core courses' which concern methods and processes involved in the disciplines which usually make up the core studies of a degree programme, followed by 'immersion modules' which follow up aspects of content in more depth. The required course distribution allows students to investigate general areas of study during their first year, and to concentrate more heavily on a 'major' area during their second and third years.

Most importantly, perhaps, this illustrates a willingness in American higher education to consider curricular changes to meet the needs of the non-traditional student. What is interesting is that by so doing the institution has benefited through a lower attrition rate, and a greater number of students taking extra courses or proceeding to post-graduate work.

#### **School For New Learning (SNL) De Paul University, Chicago, Illinois**

A major problem in attracting the non-traditional student back to education is recognised to be the change of identity required. This is considerably greater in Britain, where education is often a small part of people's lives confined to their childhood and adolescence. While FE colleges and adult education institutes offer preparation, or foundation, courses for adult returners, there is perhaps a stage prior to this where help could be given. A number of American colleges offer career and life-planning sessions during evenings and weekends. Their aim is to help people direct themselves towards what educational institutions can offer.

SNL offers a 'Discovery Workshop' over three separate sessions, covering 18 hours. By the end, participants will have:

- defined their educational goals, and discovered alternative ways of meeting them;
- articulated areas of strength and skill;
- begun to review their life experience and analyse their prior learning achievements;
- drawn up an educational plan.

This is achieved through intensive group work on a number of topics such as:

- 'Who am I?'
- 'What can I do?'
- 'What do I want?'
- 'Making decisions'.

These are followed by an introduction to what SNL can offer, but this could be substituted by informed advice about a number of institutions.

In Britain, such workshops could be run by colleges as a 'lead in' to existing adult foundation courses, or they could be free-standing and aim at disseminating information on a number of institutions in a given area. The exercises developed would in any case make a useful 'induction' component to many existing courses. While they cover ground which would appear on these courses, they add the specific objective of identity-change, before entry to college, on which there is as yet little work in Britain. The production of the portfolio of prior achievements confirms and takes forward this process.

### **CHANGING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE WITHIN A COLLEGE**

The experiential learning movement is concerned with wholesale change in the way post-school education is made available to potential students. The very techniques for improving access, giving credit for prior learning achievements, etc., are harbingers of changes in the way the curriculum is conceived within the institution. Once the possibility of acquiring college-level learning from life experience is accepted, the way is open to change the way learning is offered within the institution. In the case of Empire State College, since experiential learning is used throughout, the distinction between what is prior, and what is institutionally organised (or 'sponsored') is becoming less important. The College of Public and Community Service (CPCS), University of Massachusetts, is rare in that it was able to step outside a conventional curriculum framework and design its own learning opportunities around the perceived needs of its client group. Precisely because it is so relatively advanced, it provides a context for observing ways in which education might, in the future, be organised within a college.

#### **College of Public and Community Service (CPCS)**

CPCS grew out of the feelings of dissatisfaction and anger at the exclusivity and elitism of much American higher education shared by a number of teachers in the early 1970s. They argued that the traditional concept of a 'liberally educated person' was largely irrelevant to the needs of the urban population of the Boston area, and that a serious education must be based on these needs. Just as the NCNW uses the concept of 'empowering'

individuals to overcome barriers to equality, so CPCS teachers wished to develop qualities in their students which would enable them to tackle and overcome the problems of urban decay, racism, and poor opportunity they faced in the city. The curriculum therefore stressed skills and competencies by which individuals could relate to and change their lives, rather than the possession of any particular body of knowledge. Such competencies were not seen as a by-product of the educational process, but as integral to it. Control over one's learning was seen as the first step towards control over one's life.

Personal competence was also seen to connect with those professions which are concerned with relating to and dealing with the needs of people, such as nursing, the law and community work. CPCS consequently dedicated itself both to the development of individual competence and to the development of the 'people' professions. In this way the college involved itself in the process of change — individual, social, political — in the community it served.

CPCS admits only adult students. While using no special means to do so, it caters for a relatively high proportion of black students. This is achieved by demonstrating the use of personal competence and effectiveness in tackling some of the traditional problems faced by the black community. CPCS has developed a tradition of openness to the black and Latino communities, and has a good placement record in subsequent employment. This is a good example of the way experiential learning can contribute to overcoming inequality and racism from within the curriculum.

### **The CPCS curriculum**

The original concept at CPCS was to develop a curriculum which would stress the learner's autonomy over the learning process. As an organising framework, the notion of practising and demonstrating discrete competence was introduced. Rather than the traditional degree programme based on a certain distribution of courses, learners undertake the development of competencies drawn from a number of different 'centres'. These include human services, law, youth work, etc. CPCS provides teaching, seminars, etc., in the usual way, but the award of credit is based solely on the evaluation of competencies. In this way, what is stressed is not the absorption of a body of knowledge, but practical effectiveness in handling and manipulating concepts, ideas, skills and knowledge. Students may submit themselves for evaluation when they have developed a particular

competence; the criteria and standards they are required to reach are set out in a public document known as the 'Red Book'. Curriculum content is determined by the needs of students entering public or community work, while the competencies are based on an analysis of exactly what such workers have to do.

CPCS does not stipulate how the learning achievements required to demonstrate a particular competence are to be acquired. As well as conventional learning from reading and discussion, active projects are undertaken in the community and certain competencies actually require such involvement. It is important to note that a competence is understood to involve both a skill and its use in terms of an area of knowledge. There is consequently no contradiction in specifying competencies within a recognised subject discipline. An example is:

'Can apply methods and concepts of social psychology to the analysis of contemporary issues.'

To demonstrate such a competence, the student must be familiar with the subject area of social psychology. However, such familiarity is not what is evaluated: it is being able to use the knowledge in some contemporary context.

Rather than the traditional degree structure of 'core' courses, plus major, plus electives, CPCS specifies a required distribution of competencies covering both general education and a 'career centre'. General education competencies cover various generic skills involved in study generally, for example, analysing and applying theories, gathering experimental data. One further advantage of this is that when students are seeking an evaluation of a subject-related competence, they may also demonstrate such a generic competence.

A competence-based curriculum has many advantages. Perhaps most fundamentally, teaching and learning are organised around what students will actually have to do. Knowledge and skill are highly valued, but not as inert entities: credit can only be given for doing something with them. This system maximises student enthusiasm for learning. Where knowledge is being absorbed it is always in the context of some project or demonstration which requires doing. Staff too must think carefully about what they are teaching: if it is not conducive to bringing about some desired outcome it will be ineffective.

In this situation the college has a special responsibility to see that the competencies are so written, and the criteria and standards for demonstration so structured, that they will require serious, degree-level learning. It is true to say that doing this has been a massive and protracted staff development exercise. Each teacher has had to appraise and refine his/her own knowledge in the light of its relation to developing competencies; lists of topics to be learned are not enough. In terms of actual teaching, considerable skills are required to advise students on ways in which they might structure their learning to practice and demonstrate competence.

This account is not a critical one, and as such it ignores the very real problems of implementing such a grand curricular design. Doubts and problems remain about the status and breadth of the education CPCS is able to offer. It is worth noting, however, that not only is the employment record of CPCS graduates excellent, but the college is exerting considerable influence on the rest of the University of Massachusetts system. The credibility of CPCS is high, and entry to graduate school is perfectly possible. Although other institutions are not able to 'start from scratch', it is noticeable that defining the competencies implicit in academic learning is seen as a way forward for other institutions seeking relevance to the learner's needs. The relevance to development of the NVQ framework is clear.

## USE OF COMPETENCE-BASED EDUCATION IN BRITAIN

A great advantage of stating learning outcomes in terms of competence is that the infamous divide between skills and knowledge is potentially bridged. This approach is used in different parts of vocational and pre-vocational education in Britain, although sometimes the word 'skills' is used in place of competencies. The RSA, for example, specify learning outcomes in this way in their integrated schemes. However, other parts of vocational education, and most degree-level work, are currently based on the specification of topics in the conventional manner. As well as serving to ossify teaching and learning styles, this inhibits transfer between courses. If, for example, degree-level study involved the explicit development of student competencies, transfer-in from other forms of education would be eased. It is possible to envisage a process of education, beginning in schools, which concentrated on the progressive development of competence at different levels throughout further and higher education. Entry to a course at a higher level could then be based on achieving the required

competence to do so. Such things as the arbitrary stipulating of a number of GCSE passes for entry would become unnecessary. The development of National Curriculum attainment targets, which could feed into attainments in NVQs, could begin a very new educational process.

The notion of developing competence, with its emphasis on what students are actually able to do as a result of their education, currently informs developments in vocational preparation. It would be regrettable if other forms of post-school education did not take the development of student competence seriously, and two opposed systems resulted. For the present, however, a competence approach perhaps relates most clearly to facilitating educational credit-transfer, both for purposes of admission and advanced standing. It would seem urgent, for example, to encourage admissions tutors for post-foundation level courses throughout further and higher education to specify non-standard entry requirements.

A potential problem in stating alternative entry requirements is to find a meaningful way of clearly stating what an applicant must be able to do in order to be considered adequately prepared for the course. One solution is to make an analysis of the core competencies required to tackle the course in question, for example, in handling language, calculating, problem-solving. Once these competencies are stated, they may be translated into curricular terms which could be embodied in a prior course, or used within a portfolio preparation programme to guide the organisation of prior learning achievements.

The above approach is currently in use for the first year of a social science degree in a polytechnic, which has been analysed for the type and level of student competence it requires. It has also informed a pilot project in credit-transfer where students on a vocational preparation course in an FE college are enabled to develop competencies which have been matched with the entry requirements for certain 'second-level' vocational courses.

Apart from facilitating credit-transfers, a competence approach also enables students to take responsibility for their own learning. Since the competencies involved on a course can be clearly stated, and assessment based on them, the learning process need not be solely classroom-based, but can involve many forms of experiential learning under the control of the learner. Finally, such an approach can in itself become a staff-development exercise. By considering exactly what the competencies required by a particular form of education are, teachers can encounter their own

responsibilities in the process in a stimulating (and sometimes challenging) way.

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